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ABSTRACT

Written to help school administrators and community leaders, this pamphlet discusses school vandalism and ways to prevent it. The first sections highlight the physical, financial, and social costs of vandalism and present a profile of the typical vandal--a young teenage boy. The following sections review the psychological reasons for vandalism, which the authors say are not well understood, and enumerate the characteristics of schools, administrators, teachers, and student-school relations that accompany vandalism. Next, a "primer" on vandalism prevention first notes the inconsistent effectiveness of increased security measures and then recommends techniques for making schools less vulnerable and attractive to attack. Ways suggested to reduce vulnerability include occupying, watching, and controlling access to the school and designing schools with vandalism in mind. Techniques for reducing attractiveness as a target include revising curriculums, changing administrative policy and organizational structure, and involving students, parents, and the community. The final section gives five suggestions for immediate responses to vandalism, including quick repair, formal recordkeeping, and the seeking of restitution. A brief bibliography is appended. (RW)

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Vandalism:
A Study of School Vandalism
by the Center for Juvenile Delinquency Prevention

Number One

Center for Juvenile Delinquency Prevention
Public Service, Adult, and Continuing Education
Southwest Texas State University
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In 455 A.D the Vandals, a fierce Germanic tribe, overran Europe and sacked Rome, destroying property and terrorizing the populace. Their name now stands for deliberate property damage. Today vandals plunder our nation's schools, last year causing an estimated $590 million in damage.

Schools in the Wreck-Age.

Unlike their 5th century predecessors, the vandals of today often attack their own territory. School vandalism —the illegal and deliberate destruction of school property—is committed by students themselves. They break windows—so many that in large districts the funds spent annually on replacing broken windows could pay for a new school; they destroy school bus seats, to the tune of $3 million every year; and they commit enough arson to account for 40% of all vandalism costs.

School vandalism outranks all other assaults on private and public property. At the end of the 1973 school year, the average cost of damages from vandalism was estimated at $63,031 per school district. That figure could pay the salaries of eight reading specialists or finance a school breakfast program for 133 children for one year. A typical school's chances of being vandalized in a month are greater than one in four, and the average cost of each act of vandalism is $81.

Yet, these figures do not include the *hidden costs* of school vandalism: spiraling insurance rates and increased expenses for security guards, fencing, intrusion and fire detectors, special lighting, emergency communications equipment, and vandal-resistant windows. And every dollar spent in replacing a window or installing an alarm cannot be spent on education.

School vandalism can also have enormous *social costs*. The impact of an 89 cent can of spray paint used to cover a wall with racial epithets far exceeds the monetary cost of removing the paint. An abusive word scrawled across a hallway wall can destroy student morale, disrupt intergroup relations, undermine the authority of the administration, or even close the school. Incidents with high social costs damage the educational process as much as those with high monetary costs.

The Boy Next Door.

Today's vandal, though perhaps more destructive in monetary terms than his 5th century namesake, is no hardened, war-scarred veteran. Instead of grizzled whiskers, he sports peach fuzz. He is almost literally "the boy next door."

The "typical vandal," in fact, differs quite dramatically from the "typical juvenile delinquent."

It is significant that vandals fall into a well-defined and relatively narrow age-group. What we are dealing with is the early adolescent male who is highly subject to group pressures and transitory impulses. It is not at all unusual for adolescents to act out whatever is controlling them at the moment—rage, boredom, pent-up energy, or the sheer joy of "wreckreation." And while there are conditions that may predispose or provoke a youth toward vandalism, the problem seems to be almost human nature. Few among us have never written on a sidewalk or scrawled initials on a school desk. Vandalism, it must be remembered, cuts across all strata of society, all geographic regions, and all racial lines.

He is between 12 and 15 years old.
He is male.
He is white.

His family is less transient than those of other delinquent youth.

He committed his act of vandalism in a group, rather than alone.

He comes from a home with high parent/child conflict.

He accepts the values of the school, but may be losing out in the competition for grades and leadership positions.

Reading the Handwriting on the Wall.

The causes of vandalism remain obscure. Though research addressing the "why" of vandalism is growing, it has to date yielded no clear-cut answers. Among the motivating factors often cited are: anger, frustration, hostility, bitterness, alienation, futility, inequality, restricted opportunity, emotional pain, failure, prejudice, revenge, and need for attention.

Although much of the research is convincing, the fact remains that many vandals do not appear to be among the most angry, frustrated, hostile, alienated or needy youth. And only a small fraction of the youngsters who do fall into that category actually commit acts of vandalism. So, while most experts agree that vandalism is not totally "senseless," they do not claim to fully understand its causes.

In fact, vandalism is often poorly understood by vandals themselves, many of whom report that they "don't know why" they did it. Many others, according to case reports, offer the unsolicited observation that destruction is "fun." Still others express "satisfaction" and "exhilaration." Few consider themselves criminals.

For the time being, we can conclude only that motives for vandalism are diverse. But, the "whys" notwithstanding, the vandal profile suggests that our task is, in large part, to anticipate and redirect the impulses of young teenage boys.

For Whom the School Bells Toll.

Schools are by no means the helpless victims of early adolescence. Many school factors—most of which are amenable to change—influence the amount of vandalism that schools experience.

The following characteristics are typical of schools that suffer high property damage or loss.

Poor communication between faculty and administration. Vandalism is higher when the principal fails to define policy or makes policy decisions unilaterally.

Hostility and authoritarian attitudes on the part of teachers toward students. In response to such attitudes, students often "take it out" on the school.

Impersonality. Limited contact between teachers and students reduces student involvement with the school and increases the likelihood of vandalism.

Extreme competition for leadership status. Schools characterized by intense competition for leadership positions suffer greater *property damage and loss.*

A low degree of student identification with teachers. When the students do not value their teachers' opinions of them, the chances of vandalism are increased.

Student over-emphasis on grades. Schools at which students strive to get good grades experience more *vandalism.*

Lack of support from parents. Parents of students in high-damage schools express less favorable attitudes toward their schools than do other parents.

A high residential concentration around the school. If the school is close to the students' homes, it is a convenient target for vandalism.

The use of grades as a disciplinary tool.

A high enrollment. In larger schools where there is more to destroy, property damage is greater. This correlation between school size and vandalism prevails regardless of whether the school is located in an urban, suburban, or rural setting.

Inconsistent or lax rule enforcement, classroom control, and non-classroom supervision. When rules are well understood by students and consistently and firmly enforced by teachers and administrators, fewer offenses occur.

A Prevention Primer. If the special problems of early adolescence —often intensified by social or personal pressures—interact with school conditions to produce vandalism, then preventive measures must address these two factors: the nature of the child and the nature of the school. Furthermore, prevention must include both physical and human responses. At present most vandalism prevention or reduction programs rely on physical security: bigger and better electronic alarm systems, patrol guards, dogs, tamperproof locks, and window grills. These techniques help, but they address only 20 percent of the problem—those incidents involving breaking and entering, equipment damage, exterior defacement, and glass breakage (which usually occur during non-school hours, in the absence of witnesses). They have little effect on the day-to-day "trashing" of the school or on the disruptive acts aimed at the school's routine (bomb threats, the setting of fires, and false fire alarms) that are committed during school hours. The most sophisticated physical and electronic barriers are not sufficient to keep vandals from what they consider an attractive target. In fact, it has been argued that alarms and armed guards, besides lowering student and staff morale, often themselves become a challenge, inviting rather than deterring vandals.

Vandalism prevention, then, requires not a narrow or piecemeal approach, but a varied and comprehensive effort that includes both physical and human components geared to the school's specific problems. Furthermore, an effective long-term program must involve the community—parents, neighbors, police and civic groups as well as students, teachers, and school administrators.

Keeping these things in mind, the first step in vandalism prevention is to look at the target—the school. Why is the school such an *easy* target? And why is it such an *attractive* target to young adolescents?

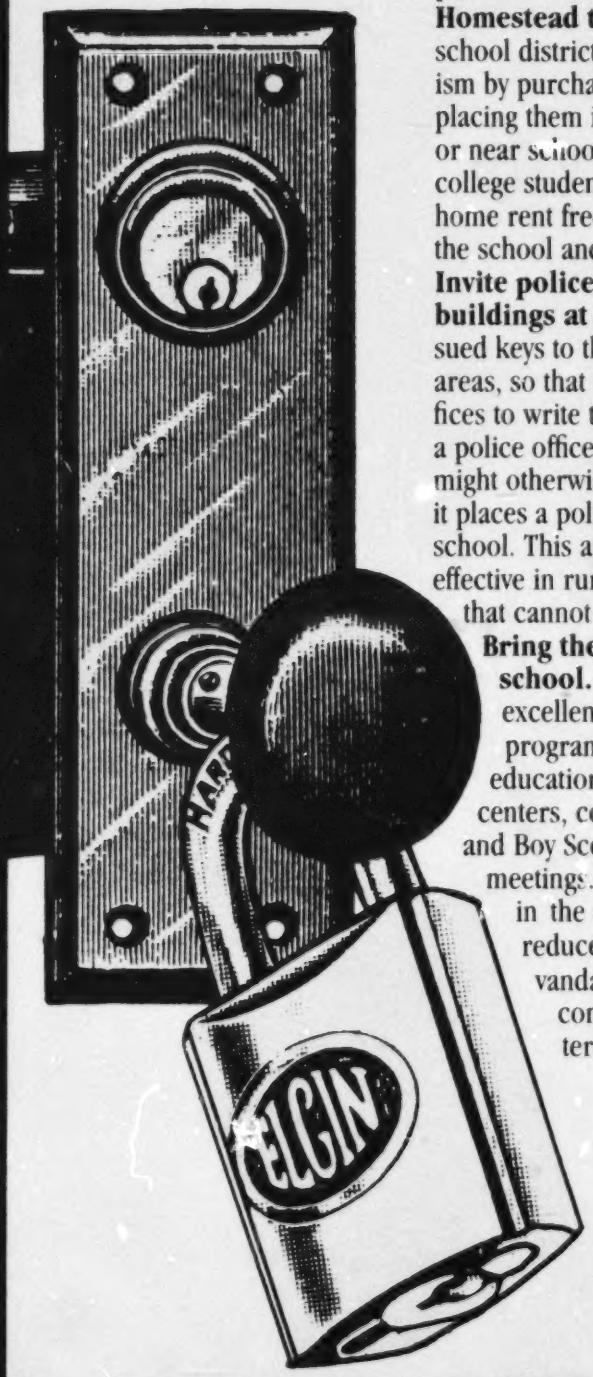
Occupy the School.

Employ a custodial force around the clock. In most schools the entire custodial force works at one time, leaving the school empty at night. As an alternative, custodians can be assigned staggered shifts, so that the school is occupied around the clock. Twenty-four hour custodians are particularly appropriate in schools suffering sporadic property damage which demands more than a roving patrol but less than permanent security guards.

Homestead the school. Several school districts have reduced vandalism by purchasing mobile homes and placing them in strategic locations on or near school property. A family or college student lives in each mobile home rent free in return for watching the school and its grounds.

Invite police to use the school buildings at night. Police can be issued keys to the schools in their patrol areas, so that they can use school offices to write their reports. This places a police officer in the school when it might otherwise be unoccupied—and it places a police car in front of the school. This approach is particularly effective in rural areas and in districts that cannot afford an alarm system.

Bring the community into the school. The school is an excellent place for recreational programs, health clinics, adult education classes, counseling centers, community gatherings, and Boy Scout, Girl Scout, and PTA meetings. The presence of people in the school building not only reduces the opportunity for vandalism, but also stimulates community and student interest in the school.



Watch the School.

Use school neighbors as "eyes and ears." Ask nearby homeowners to watch the school and report suspicious activities. Emphasize careful observation and rapid reporting but discourage direct involvement in any situation observed. Such programs work best if they are organized but based on informal involvement rather than formal routine; if they are accompanied by overall involvement of parents and community with the school; and if they offer some sort of prestige to participants.

Employ roving patrols. A uniformed patrol, used in lieu of or in conjunction with an alarm system, can deter vandalism. The individuals hired to patrol should establish rapport with neighborhood youth and open communication with police and community leaders. They should also vary their patrol patterns.

Hire student patrols during the summer and on weekends. The school district or community can provide its youth with part-time or summer employment and at the same time curb vandalism by paying students to patrol the school grounds during weekends, holidays, and summer vacation. These students should be paid an adequate wage and considered an integral part of the school's security force.

Control Access to the School.

Install an alarm system. Alarms are the most expensive vandalism control measure a school can employ. And while they can detect vandals, they cannot apprehend; they can merely signal the monitor, who may be miles away. They can be, however, an effective deterrent and should be considered as part of any comprehensive plan to control vandalism. If alarm systems are linked with a surveillance camera,

chances of apprehending intruders are greatly increased.

Hire school security guards. Unlike alarm systems, school security personnel are employed during both school and non-school hours. When school is not in session, their only function is to guard property and deter intruders. During the school day they can help maintain order and safety. It is extremely important that the individuals hired be able to relate to and work with young people.

Design the School with Vandalism Prevention in Mind.

Limit ground-to-roof access. Eliminate low overhanging roofs; avoid unnecessary exterior fixtures; near buildings, plant trees which cannot be climbed; consider raising as much of the school plant as possible from ground level.

Build the school at some distance from residential areas. While the school should be located near the homes of most of those it serves, it will suffer less property damage if there is a buffer zone between it and surrounding residential areas.

Design the school with plenty of "defensible space," so that the normal flow of school traffic allows continuing, casual surveillance of the premises.

Use vandal-resistant surfaces. Use harder surfaces in damage-prone areas; on walls use epoxy paint or glazed tile that is easily and inexpensively replaced or repaired; use small wall panels and keep replacement panels in stock; place permanent signs, building names, and decorative hardware at a level that cannot be reached from the ground.

Plan windows carefully. Avoid windows that are vulnerably placed; use small panes of glass to simplify replacement; use thick tempered glass, thick acrylic, or plexiglass for windows in heavily travelled or hangout areas; avoid useless windows in student stores, administration offices, and industrial arts storage areas.

Plan entries with multiple use in mind. Install flexible internal gates to block off specific areas or corridors when necessary; provide separate exterior entries for community use and student use; inside the building, create areas for informal gathering near entrances and exits by installing soft drink machines and/or benches.

Locate or relocate playgrounds and access roads to provide better surveillance by roving patrols.

Consider outdoor lighting. Opinion on this issue is divided. Many schools report a decline in vandalism after installing hardened exterior night lighting. Others report that elimination of all night lighting reduces vandalism, presumably because young adolescents are afraid of the dark. If lighting is used, it should be directed away from windows to keep vandals from seeing the process of destruction or its outcome.

Channel graffiti. Graffiti artists will usually select light, smooth surfaces rather than dark, rough surfaces. Therefore, school officials can channel graffiti onto one or two walls designed to withstand such treatment. Most walls can be painted by students or maintenance staff at regular—but not too frequent—intervals. Or one wall can be officially designated a "legitimate" graffiti wall, though this approach removes some of the challenge inherent in informal graffiti.

Making the Target Less Attractive.

The school is not only an easy target but also an attractive target for vandalism. It represents enforced learning, discipline, and mandatory attendance to students who are, simply by virtue of their age, rejecting adult standards and striving to achieve independence from adult control. Students are additionally provoked if the school functions in an impersonal, undemocratic, repressive, or manipulative manner, further increasing the likelihood of vandalism. Also, our list of characteristics associated with vandals and vandalized schools indicates that property damage and loss are higher when competition for rewards is intense, availability of rewards is limited, and distribution of rewards is unfair.

All of this suggests that school policy and atmosphere have a direct bearing on school vandalism. Below are changes in school governance that can help remove the features that make a school an attractive target for vandals. These procedures, especially in combination, have proven effective against all forms of vandalism, including those which most commonly occur while school is in session.

Making the Target Less Vulnerable. Schools are an easy target for vandals. Most are public, secular, and often unoccupied. Most will remain public and secular, but they need not remain unoccupied—or unprotected, or unobserved.

Following are techniques that have made some schools less vulnerable to vandals. These are especially effective against problems occurring during non-school hours.

Revise the Curriculum.

Alternative schools. Though originally designed to perform educational functions, alternative schools have proven effective in reducing school violence and vandalism. They provide an option to students who are not benefiting from the regular academic classroom. These schools, operated within or alongside the traditional school, are usually characterized by low student-teacher ratios, small classes, intense individualized instruction, individual counseling, and extensive use of the community as a learning resource. They offer an alternative to suspension, personalize the learning environment, and provide success experiences to students who have in the past performed poorly.

Law-related education and police-school liaison programs. In many communities, the police department has assigned school resource or liaison officers to local junior and senior high schools. These officers may on occasion assume policing duties, but their primary function is to counsel students and teach law-related courses. These activities acquaint students with the positive role that law plays in our society, and personalize the relationship between the "cop on the beat" and the "kid on the corner."

Action learning. This term refers to apprenticeship programs as well as training in practical aspects of adult life. The former allow students academic credit for community work, such as tutoring, candystriping, or assisting physicians, lawyers, or other professionals. The latter provides instruction in skills such as checkbook balancing, comparative shopping, and applying for a job. Both address the boredom and frustration that are believed to be linked to truancy, violence, and vandalism.

Reward distribution. The school's reward structure is related to school crime. Although the school may offer attractive incentives to achieve, most students receive very little in the way of rewards. Many of those who lose out still care about the competition. They become frustrated at being denied what their environment values, and they vent their anger on the apparent source of their problems—the school. It should be possible to spread the rewards around without compromising performance standards—perhaps by recognizing improvement as well as achievement, or by acknowledging forms of achievement other than scholastic, athletic, and social.

Change Administrative Policy and Organizational Structure.

Leadership. According to the National Institute of Education's Safe School Study, the leadership of the principal is a critical factor in reducing or preventing school crime. Strong principals who are visible, available, and responsive to students and staff appear to be most successful in eliminating violence and vandalism. Those who are less successful are often described as "unavailable and ineffective."

Discipline. The Safe School Study also found that the exercise of discipline, through clear enunciation and even-handed enforcement of rules, is associated with a low incidence of school crime.

Mini-schools. To increase the likelihood that students will find school a fulfilling experience, many districts are establishing mini-schools—schools small enough to allow the individual student to feel significant. Similarly, several large schools are currently functioning on a "house" basis: the school is divided programmatically into several smaller units with which students can more easily identify.

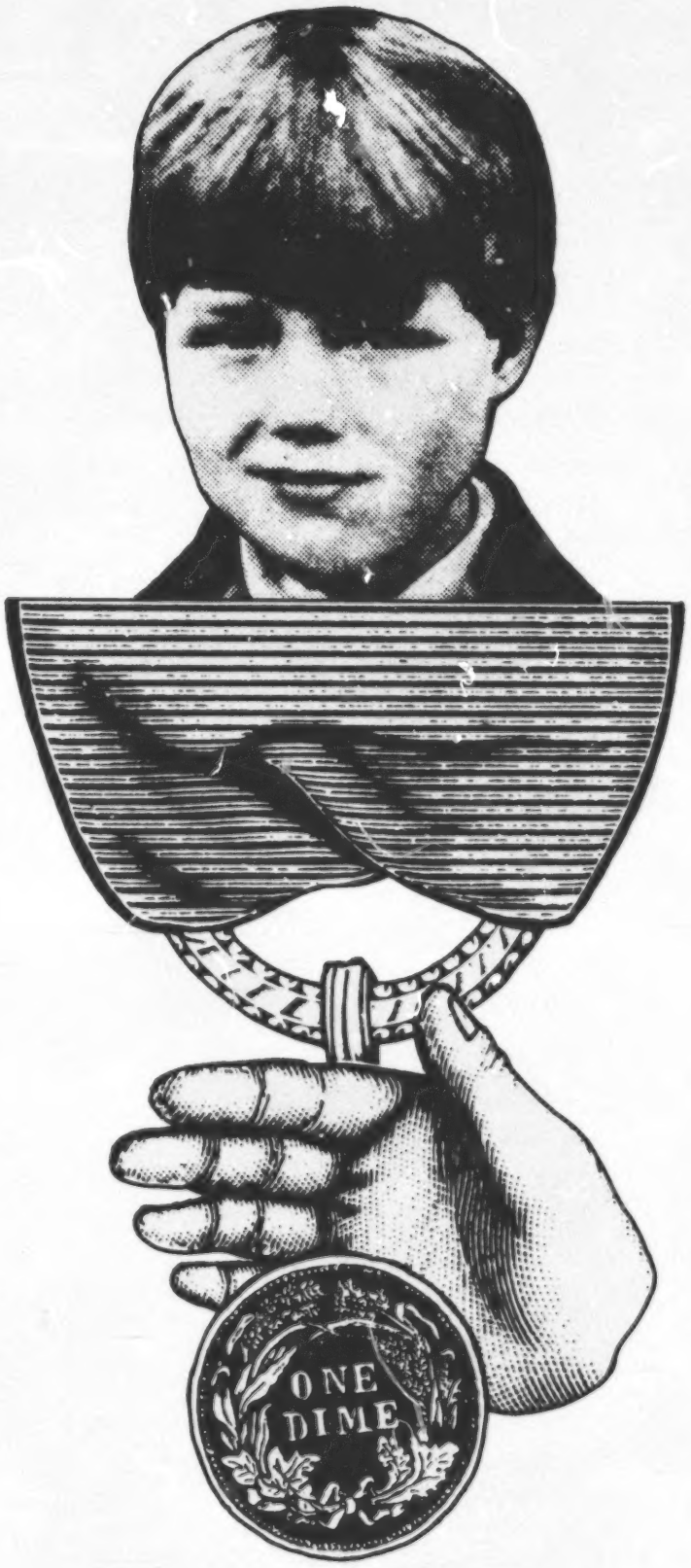
Involve the Students.

Vandalism fund. This procedure utilizes peer pressure to the school's advantage. The community or school district puts aside a certain amount of money and announces that the fund will be used to cover the costs of vandalism. Any money left over reverts to the students to be used as they choose. This plan works because it educates students about the costs of vandalism, allows them to see the positive results of curbing property damage, and, most important, gives them full responsibility for the problem.

School security advisory council. Several school districts have established voluntary student security advisory councils which conduct workshops and small group discussions focusing on vandalism and violence prevention. These committees increase awareness of the school's problems, generate recommendations for action, and give students an opportunity to participate in school decision-making.

Students teaching students. Older students can be helpful in influencing younger students. In several communities, junior and senior high school students visit fourth and sixth grade classrooms, where they show a film about vandalism and then lead a discussion on the causes and consequences of vandalism.

School beautification projects. These projects involve students in the care of the school building and grounds in an attempt to increase their pride in and responsibility for the school. The more effective projects are selected by students themselves, continue throughout the school year, and focus on marginal students rather than school leaders.



Involve the Parents.

"Open door" policy. An open door policy allows parents to go directly to their child's classroom whenever they wish without securing a visitor's permit from the office. This simple policy offers parents concrete evidence that they are indeed welcome at school.

Parents as classroom and administrative aides. In some schools parents are serving on antitruancy committees along with teachers and students. They visit youngsters and their families in an effort to resolve truancy problems. In other schools parents are serving as hall monitors, supervising extracurricular activities, and helping out in the classrooms.

Parents as an educational resource. Parents are also the school's best source of guest speakers and contacts for work-study or apprenticeship programs.

Faculty men's clubs. Some school districts have initiated faculty men's clubs to acquaint fathers with the male teaching staff and to encourage them to assume more responsibility for their children's progress in school.

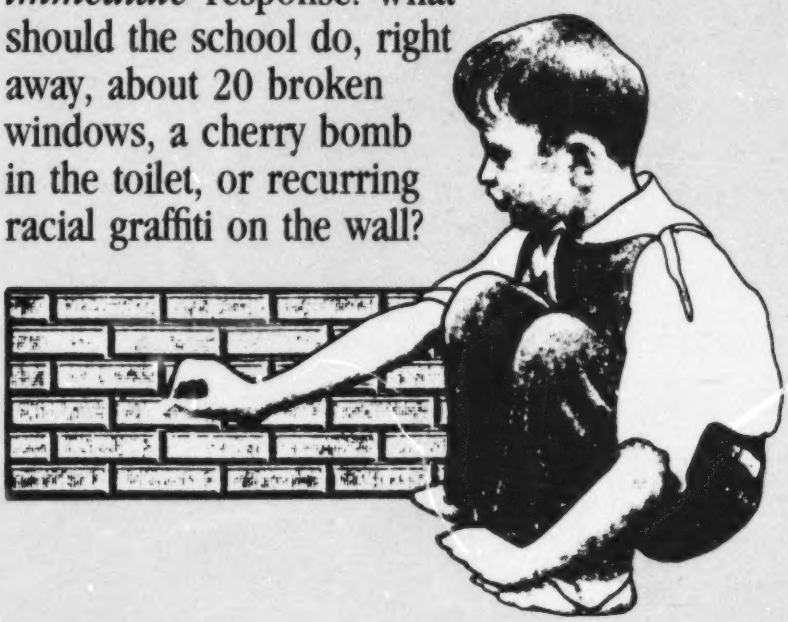
Involve the Community.

Vandalism forum. In one community, students and law enforcement, school district, and city personnel sponsor day-long forums on vandalism. The forums introduce citizens to the causes and costs of vandalism and give them an opportunity to voice their concerns and initiate preventive programs.

Police-community and university sponsored programs. Police departments can initiate public relations programs within schools and youth-serving agencies. In addition, they can enlist the help of youth in preventing vandalism through police-sponsored groups such as The Police Youth Service Corps, which recruits adolescents from high-crime areas to work as public safety aides. Similarly, law students from neighboring universities can be brought into the schools at minimal or no cost to discuss the legal implications of vandalism.

Programs sponsored by the business community. The business community can often be enlisted to set up and fund programs that the school could not otherwise afford. Interested businessmen can be asked to set up a profit-making automotive shop, for example. Students in the shop get paid when they attend but not when they are absent—as if they were in industry. They receive practical training **within the school**. At the same time a portion of the business community has a financial and personal investment in the school.

Picking Up The Pieces. The preventive measures listed on the preceding pages can, of course, function as part of a long-range proactive response plan. But they do not address the question of *immediate* response. What should the school do, right away, about 20 broken windows, a cherry bomb in the toilet, or recurring racial graffiti on the wall?



Repair the damage immediately. Quick repair keeps perpetrators from admiring their handiwork, retards the epidemic effect of vandalism, and minimizes any social impact the act may have. **Initiate formal record-keeping procedures and make sure they are followed.** Schools faced with serious problems should begin recording all acts of vandalism. They should also consult law enforcement personnel about when police should and should not be called. **Work with the courts.** When a school begins to have problems, it should work with the juvenile justice system so that the two institutions can coordinate their efforts with regard to school-age offenders. **Begin an incident analysis.** Careful record-keeping should allow a school to plot the incidence of vandalism to find out precisely where and when each type of offense is occurring. For example, using incident analysis, NIE's Safe School Study found that: fire and bomb threats most often occur on Tuesdays; school property offenses tend to occur with greater frequency toward the end of each semester, especially in November and December; break-ins and school property offenses occur most often on weekends and Mondays. This kind of information is invaluable in planning a vandalism reduction and prevention plan.
Consider restitution. Restitution is a set of legal and administrative procedures through which the school receives payment from vandals for damages they cause. While it seems reasonable to require payment for damages, restitution does not appear to be worth the effort. In the first place, most vandals are not caught. In the Los Angeles School District, which has an aggressive restitution program, only 30 percent of the offenders are ever identified. From this 30 percent, most restitution is paid before matters get to court. Going through lengthy legal processes to obtain the rest is simply not cost-effective. However, a parent faced with the possibility of a court case may make a greater effort to keep his or her child out of trouble.

The Vandals who overran Europe in the 4th and 5th centuries left an indelible mark on the civilized world and a legacy of destruction which persists even today. If the destruction caused by today's vandals continues at its current rate, our schools may become slums, or worse yet, prisons.

In search of real solutions, researchers and social scientists continue to probe the causes of vandalism. But until we have a better understanding of those deliberate acts of destruction, each community must respond as best it can by taking cues from the successes and failures of others who have confronted the problem.

There is a growing body of literature addressing the causes and prevention of vandalism. A concerned community, however, can not wait for prescriptive solutions or expect the emergence of panaceas. Many communities have not only found workable solutions to their own problems, but have also contributed to the fund of knowledge which may someday eliminate the problem of vandalism altogether.

This booklet was prepared to acquaint community leaders with some of the findings of researchers and results of experimental prevention programs. For persons interested in a more detailed review of the literature, a selected bibliography follows.

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